

BLACK HISTORY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA



Black British Columbians: An Undeniable Impact

In 1858, in need of “a sizeable group of hardworking settlers” who would be loyal to the British Crown, colonial governor Sir James Douglas sent an invitation to the San Francisco Black community. As a result, an estimated 800 African American people arrived in what is now British Columbia, on the promise of opportunity and access to public life. Douglas himself was of Afro-Caribbean heritage: his father was Scottish and his mother was a free woman of Barbadian-Creole ancestry. His son, James W. Douglas, became the first person of Black ancestry to serve in the Legislative Assembly with his election in 1875.

These early settlers persevered and prospered in spite of discrimination. In 1861, members of Victoria’s Black community were barred from joining the volunteer fire department, so with the support of Governor Douglas, they formed the Colony’s first militia unit, called the Pioneer Rifle Corps. Other prominent “firsts” in this period include John Craven Jones, Salt Spring Island’s first schoolteacher, his brother William “Painless” Jones, the province’s first registered dentist, and Grafton Tyler Brown, the first professional artist to work in British Columbia. Brown had his own studio in Victoria, where he hosted an exhibition of 22 of his B.C. works in June 1883. The 20th and 21st centuries brought further recognition for B.C.’s Black community, with notable successes in sport, entertainment, and politics.



Emery Barnes

Political Trailblazers

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs was elected to Victoria City Council in 1866, making him the first Black politician elected to public office in B.C., and the third in all of North America. In 1868, he was chosen as a delegate to the Yale Convention, where he joined Amor de Cosmos and other members of the Confederation League in outlining terms of union between the new nation of Canada and the future province of British Columbia, including the demand for a responsible government and a representative legislative assembly.

Emery Barnes, MLA (1972-1996) moved to British Columbia to play for the B.C. Lions football team and helped them win a Grey Cup in 1964. After retiring from sports, he became a Member of the Legislative Assembly and in 1994, the first Black person in Canada to serve as Speaker. As an MLA, he was particularly concerned with alleviating poverty and advancing civil rights. Barnes was also a registered social worker, a recipient of the Order of British Columbia, and one of the founders of Black History Month in B.C.

Hon. Rosemary Brown, MLA (1972-1986) was the first Black woman elected to a legislature in Canada. She championed legislation to improve life for women, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Brown helped in the founding of the B.C. Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and was the recipient of a United Nations Human Rights Fellowship, the Order of British Columbia, and the Order of Canada. In 1993, she was sworn in as a member of the Privy Council of Canada for her role as a watchdog on the Security Intelligence Review Committee.



Canada Post issued a postage stamp in honour of Rosemary Brown in February 2009

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